

**TUTORIAL**  
**3.13**

# God's Faithfulness to Israel

Bible presenter Scot Keen discusses Israel's rejection here in Romans chapter nine. He clarifies that God is still faithful to His promises to Israel, and so we can be sure that He will be faithful to us as well.

## Introduction

In this tutorial we will talk about God's dealings with Israel as a nation, which was an important topic in the first century. First let's look at Romans chapter nine. To give you an idea of how much this chapter refers to Israel, notice how many times Paul mentions them. Paul talks about his brethren, his kinsmen, Israel, Abraham's descendants, Jews, the sons of Israel, the posterity, disobedient obstinate people, remnant, my fellow countrymen, natural branches and also uses some pronouns referring to them: they, their, themselves, you and them. As you read Romans chapter nine, keep in mind that this is a literary section, as that is important when interpreting this passage. So we can conclude that this chapter is about Israel.

In Romans chapter nine Paul will say he has great sorrow for his kinsmen, who are Israelites. In chapter ten his prayer is for their salvation. Paul has great concern for them because they have been temporarily set aside in God's program. God has turned His focus from the Jews to the Gentiles. We will look at this in more detail in chapter eleven, but for now we can know that at a future time God will resume His program with Israel. Getting back to Romans chapter nine through eleven, this section is about a vindication of God's dealings with Israel. Someone could rightfully ask the question: How could God not keep His promises to Israel? Is God just? Is He righteous? Paul says it is not as though God's Word has failed. He wants to lay to rest our fears that God has broken His promises to Israel.

## God's faithfulness to Israel

Let's address God's faithfulness to Israel. The question about Israel surfaced in Romans three, with minimal explanation on Paul's part. It was in that passage that Paul said that there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. The question was raised, "What advantage do Jews have?" Paul gave it a brief

response. He said, "Much in every way, to them were committed the oracles or the promises of God." There were advantages of being a Jew, but Paul didn't go into the details then. But now Paul will flesh out the topic. Why would Paul do this? Paul had just stated that nothing can separate the elect from the love of God. If I was a believer in the first century, the first question that would come to mind would be, "What about Israel?" Israel was God's elect people, and they had been separated, it appears, from the love of God. So this was a very natural question that could be asked and answered, and that is what Romans nine through eleven sets out to do.

## Examples from the Old Testament

Here are some Old Testament references of God's promises that Israel would never be separated from him. Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, and the Lord has forgotten me" (Isaiah 49). God responded, "Can a woman forget her nursing child? These may forget, but I will never forget you." It would be a rare occurrence for a nursing mother to forget her child. And yet, even if she was to forget her child, God says He would not forget Israel. God says, "The mountains may be removed, and the hills may shake, but my loving kindness will not be removed from you, and my covenant of peace will not be shaken" (Isaiah 54). God uses His covenant love for Israel as a guarantee that they would never be separated from His love.

Another Old Testament reference is a wonderful promise in Jeremiah thirty-one. "Thus says the Lord who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon, and the stars for light by night. If this fixed order departs from before Me, then the offspring of Israel shall cease from being a nation before Me forever." My point with this small smattering of examples is that God has made several promises to Israel, that they would always be His people, that He would not forget them, etc. With that being said, Paul tells believers in Romans eight that they will never be separated from the love of God. He has to address the issue of God's faithfulness to Israel, and here is why. If God doesn't keep His promises to Israel, how do we know that God will keep His promises to us? So Romans nine through eleven becomes a very relevant passage of Scripture for all believers, because it is only because God is faithful to Israel that we can have certainty that God will be faithful to us.

Paul's answer is found in Romans 9:6, "It is not as though the word of God has failed." Before he explains himself further, Paul says that regardless of how things appear, God's promises to Israel have not failed. This will set the stage for the rest of what He says in this very important section of Scripture. The first thing that Paul mentions is that God is just in setting Israel aside. He shows that God is just in Romans 9:6-29. God was just when He chose Isaac instead of Ishmael. God was just when He chose Jacob instead of Esau. God was just when He hardened Pharaoh and when He showed mercy to Israel. Now too, God is just when He shows mercy to Gentiles and when He hardens the Israelites. God is just in setting Israel aside.

And then Paul explains that God in fact had a reason to set Israel aside. Setting Israel aside was not the result of an arbitrary choice of sovereignty, but because of Israel's unbelief. God did have a reason to set Israel aside. Then Paul will proceed to show us that there is still a remnant of believing Jews. They have not been rejected as a whole, and God is using this time of Israel's fall to mean salvation for the Gentiles. Paul concludes that Israel has not been set aside forever. God will yet resume His program with Israel. All Israel will be saved. It is important for us to keep these pieces of the puzzle in mind as we look at the Romans chapters nine to eleven when Paul tells us that God's promises to Israel have not failed.

## **The tragedy of Israel's rejection**

Paul begins his explanation with the tragedy of Israel's rejection in Romans 9:1-3, "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." Paul grieves the tragedy of Israel's rejection. Paul's heart is broken for his kinsmen. He says, "I... wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." Paul is talking here about Jewish people who do not believe in Christ. His heart is sorrowful for them, to the point that he says he wishes, if possible, he could be accursed for them. We see the tragedy of Israel's rejection and Paul's heart for his kinsmen.

This tragedy is amplified in light of the privileges that they possessed. Paul says, first of all, they received the adoption as sons. This takes us back to Exodus chapter four where God says, "Israel is my firstborn son." They were the Lord's chosen possession. They had the adoption as sons, and also the glory. The glory here talks about God's Shekinah Glory, the presence of God that was manifest first at the tabernacle, and then later in the temple. It was indicative of God's favour, His presence and His protection. To them belonged the glory. Not only that he says, but to them also belonged the covenants. The covenants here refer to the Abrahamic covenant: God's gift of the land forever. It also refers to the Mosaic covenant: God's promise of a regathering and a regeneration of the nation. The Davidic covenant: God's promise that a descendant of David would reign forever. And finally it refers to the new covenant: God's promise to give them a new heart. These are all covenants that God made with Israel.

Notice that Paul looks at unbelieving Israelites and he says, "These covenants belong to them." It is something that they can anticipate in the future. He also mentions the giving of the Law. And of course, references the fact that out of all the nations, Israel alone possessed God's special revelation. As Psalm 147 says, "He shows his word to Jacob. His precepts and his judgments to Israel." Again, Paul says, "To them belong the fathers." This alludes to the patriarchs

from which Israel was descended. “The lord your God, to him belong heaven and the heavens of heavens. The earth and all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart and his love on your fathers, and chose their offspring after them” (Deuteronomy 10). There are all Israel’s privileges. The glory, the covenants, the fathers. Then Paul adds the Law, the temple services, and the promises to the list above. All these things belong to them, and ultimately from them is the Christ, the promised One.

The privileges Israel had put them in a great position to know God and glorify Him, but instead they, “turned their table into a snare,” as Paul will say later on in chapter eleven. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. The tragedy of Israel's rejection is amplified by the privileges they possessed.

## **The justice of Israel’s rejection**

Now we will look at the justice of Israel's rejection. How is it that God can set them aside and still maintain faithfulness to his promises? Paul deals with this firstly by showing that physical descent does not guarantee that one will inherit God’s promises. Look at Romans 9:6, “It is not as though the word of God has failed.” In light of all these promises and privileges God's Word did not fail. The explanation is simply this. They are not Israel who are descended from Israel. They are not all Israelites who are descended from the man Israel. In other words, Paul is beginning to talk about an Israel within Israel; a remnant.

Paul says, “They are not all Israel who are descendant from Israel, nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but through Isaac your descendant will be named.” One can be a biological child of Abraham and not be a recipient of the promise, and yet God is still faithful to His Word. To develop that promise, Paul talks about Isaac and Ishmael. “It is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants” (Romans 9:8). Speaking of Isaac, verse nine, “This is the word of promise, ‘At this time I will come and Sara shall have a son’. And not only this, but there was Rebecca also.” Paul will go on to talk about Jacob and Esau shortly, but first he explains that one can be a physical descendant of Abraham, as Ishmael was, and still not inherit the promise of God. Ishmael was not a child of promise. He was a biological child, and no one would accuse God of failing to keep His promise to Abraham when God chose to keep it with Isaac instead of Ishmael.

One can be a physical descendant and not inherit the promise of God. Some might argue, “Yeah, but that example involved two different mothers.” And so Paul goes a step further and uses Jacob and Esau as examples. “And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to his choice would stand, not because of works but because of him who calls, it was said to her, ‘The older will serve the younger’. Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I

hated.” (Romans 9:10-13). I want to pause and unravel that for a moment. Remember that according to custom Esau was the one in the rightful place for blessing, and Jacob had no claim on that. It was the firstborn who was supposed to be blessed. The one who was in the rightful place did not receive it, and the one who had no claim on it did receive it, and that was God's freedom of choice in that matter.

Think about the larger context of what was happening in the first century. Paul is addressing the ones who are in the rightful place for blessing but did not receive it, the Jews. He is addressing too the ones who had no claim on it but did receive it, the Gentiles. And God is free to do that because He is God. He says again, "The older will serve the younger, just as it is written; Jacob I loved, but Esau I've hated." God has right to choose who will be the recipients of His promises, whom He desires to bless. And Paul is using individuals to throw light on God's dealings with Israel and Gentiles. The larger context shows that God is free to do this. Not only do we have Ishmael and Esau, but we also have another example here with Pharaoh.

God chose who was going to be the recipients of the promises. By the way, I do want to add that if you read Genesis you will perceive that Ishmael was not reprobated to hell, and neither was Esau. This was a matter of who was going to carry the covenant promises. With that being said, the question still would naturally arise: What do we say then? Is there injustice with God? May it never be. You get this emphasis of God's freedom, and question remains: Is God being unjust? Is God simply doing what He wants to do, and is that okay? Paul says yes, God can do this, "For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.'" (Romans 9:15).

Now, the context of this is Exodus thirty-three. This is where Israel has worshipped the golden calf, and Moses comes off the mountain and he is angry with them. God says He is not going to personally continue with them on their journey, but He will send his angel with them. And Moses not only begs God to accompany them, but also begs God for assurance that He will do this. company them. And God shows Moses His glory as a sign that He is going to continue with the nation on their journey. In this context God says, "I will show mercy to whom I show mercy." The idea is that God is showing mercy to Israel, not because they deserve it but because God is a gracious God.

So the question that Israel would have to grapple with in the first century is this: Is it okay for God to show mercy to those who are undeserving of mercy? Of course they have to answer yes. That is exactly what God did with Israel at the nation's beginnings, when God constituted them a nation and led them out of slavery in Egypt. Paul says in Romans 9:16, "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to

demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth'. So then he has mercy on whom he desires, and he hardens whom he desires."

Let's briefly go to the book of Exodus to decipher this. God demonstrates to all the world that he alone is God. God says that He will take them for Him as a people. "I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord when I bring you out from the burden of the Egyptians" (Exodus 6:17). You have this theme of *you will know that I am the Lord* that is developed throughout the exodus. "By this you shall know that I am the Lord" (Exodus 7:17). "The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord" (Exodus 7:5). "That you may know that there is no one like the Lord your God" (Exodus 8:10). And it goes on and on throughout the Exodus account. When the spies went into Jericho, you remember what Rahab said? She said, "We heard about what your God did, how He dried up the Red Sea, and when we heard this our hearts melted with fear, because your God is God in heaven above, and on the earth beneath."

God's name was declared throughout the earth. The reason God's name was declared throughout the earth was because God hardened Pharaoh. He solidified Pharaoh in his decision to rebel. He locked him into his choice. When that took place, we have not one plague, not two plagues, but ten plagues. And because we have ten plagues, God made a mockery of the gods of Egypt over and over again, and His name was proclaimed throughout the whole earth. Back in Romans 9:17 God says, "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.'" Paul's conclusion is in verse eighteen, "He has mercy on whom he desires, and he hardens whom he desires."

Let's just picture ourselves as Jews in the first century. We know that God has turned His attention away from the Jews, and towards the Gentiles, and we are struggling with this. How is it okay for God to harden the Jews, and to show mercy to the Gentiles?

Paul, in essence, is telling them that by their own theology they must agree to this. He asks, "Is it okay for God to show mercy to whom He desires?" He showed mercy to Israel so he can show mercy to Gentiles. Is it okay for God to harden whom He desires? God hardened Pharaoh. No Jew would have difficulty with that, but when the tables are reversed and God is hardening Israel, it is harder to contemplate. Paul says, "He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." Keep in mind that this is in the larger context of God setting Israel aside and turning His attention towards the Gentiles. We see that God is free in the exercise of His mercy and His judgement. In fact, we see this here in Romans 9: 17-18. Pharaoh again is an example of God hardening whom He desires. Israel is an example of God showing mercy to whom He desires. Now the tables are turned. God is

showing mercy Gentiles, and He has hardened the nation of Israel. So Paul moves into the next aspect of this argument, a defence of God's freedom.

## **A defense of God's freedom**

God is God, and He can do what He wants to do. He will always be consistent with His nature and His character. Look at verses nineteen and following. Paul anticipates the question. He says, "You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who resists his will?'" It appears like someone visualises themselves as a helpless pawn as God is moving the chess pieces to accomplish his purposes. Paul's first answer is this, "On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" Paul addresses this by first putting man in his place, "Who are you oh man." He reminds them: you are just a human being and He is God, so be careful with the questions that you ask. "Who are you oh man, who answers back to God?" Then he uses an analogy, "The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?" He illustrates his point with an example of a potter making pottery.

Of course it would be ludicrous for a piece of pottery to say, "Why did you make me like this?" God is the Potter and so has freedom, and Paul wants the objector to know that. God is free in the exercise of His mercy and His judgement. God is God, and we are not, and so He is free. God is free. Paul defends God's freedom. Let's go progress with this further. "Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?" (Romans 9:21). You know what? That is exactly what God did with Israel. Out of the clay of humanity God made one lump for honourable use, Israel, and everything else was common. If God wants to do that now in a different way, He is able to do that. He has freedom. He is the potter, and we are the clay. Paul now begins to answer this objection in another way. The question remains: why does God find fault who resist His will?


His first answer is we are human and He is God. He is the Potter, we are the clay. Let's get that straight first. But now he goes on to explain, "What if God, although willing to demonstrate his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?" This brings to mind a couple of images. First of all we think of Egypt and Pharaoh, through which God demonstrated His wrath and power. If God wished, He could have demonstrated His wrath to Israel, but in fact He is forbearing His wrath in order to show mercy. In essence Paul is saying yes God is free, God is God, but at the same time God is not dealing too severely with Israel, in the sense that there is no opportunity for mercy. God is showing mercy to Israelites. He is withholding wrath in order to show mercy.

So Paul says, "What if God although willing to demonstrate his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And he did so to make known the riches of his glory

upon vessels of mercy, which he prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom he also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.” I’d like to make a comment here. First of all, I believe that the concept of *vessels of wrath prepared for destruction* does not involve a fixed quantity, at least not the way I understand it. I think this because, in Ephesians chapter two, Paul talks about vessels of wrath, and mentions that at one time he saw himself as being a child of wrath, who is now a child of God. You have vessels of wrath prepared for destruction (unbelieving Israelites) and God is holding back wrath in order to show mercy. He did so to make known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy which he prepared beforehand for glory, “Even us, whom he also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.”

I believe Paul is eluding to believing Jews whom God has shown mercy, and now they are prepared beforehand for glory. But it is not just believing Jews, it is also believing Gentiles, “Even us, whom he also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.” He backs this theologically in Romans 9:25, “As he says also in Hosea, ‘I will call those who were not My people, ‘My people,’ and her who was not beloved, ‘beloved.’ And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, ‘you are not My people,’ there they shall be called sons of the living God.” This is a beautiful quote in Hosea, and it recalls that Israel had gone from being God's people to being rejected. And God said He would call them once again His people. The amazing thing is that Paul applies this here to Gentiles because of a point of similarity. “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved; for the Lord will execute his word on the earth, thoroughly and quickly.’” (Romans 9:27).

And just as Isaiah foretold, “Unless the Lord of heaven's armies had not left to us a remnant, we would have been like Sodom and Gomorrah.” Paul states here that Israel’s rejection is just. He shows that physical descent does not guarantee one will inherit the promises of God. He also shows that God is free in the exercise of His mercy and judgement. No one would accuse God of breaking His promises to Abraham when God showed Isaac mercy instead of Ishmael, to Jacob instead of Esau, nor should they say that in Paul's day either. God's freedom is defended. He can show mercy to whom He desires, and He can harden whom He desires, because He is God. He is the Potter and we are the clay. Yet there is a flavour of God's mercy in this, that even though God is willing to show his wrath, He is actually holding it back in order to show mercy. And not just to Jews, but also to the Gentiles who come to faith in Jesus.







## **DISCUSSION POINTS**

### *God's Faithfulness to Israel*

1. Why is the issue of Israel's rejection relevant for the church?
2. What is the main issue that Paul is addressing in Romans 9 – 11?
3. Paul uses God's choice of Isaac and Jacob as well as His hardening of Pharaoh to illustrate...?
4. Who are presently the recipients of God's mercy?
5. Who is presently under a judicial hardening?